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An Enduring Influence on Imperial Defence and Grand Strategy: British Perceptions of the Italian Navy, 1935-1943

The Mediterranean Sea was a vital artery in the British imperial system, the importance of which grew rapidly after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. By linking the homeland to the prized possessions of the Far East; India, Ceylon and Singapore, and to the Australasian dominions, control of the Mediterranean and the security of its sea lanes were essential to the free flow of men and goods between the homeland and these distant stations, as well as the sending of military forces to protect them. Within the region itself, vital natural resources from the Middle East could also be returned to Britain. Consequently, regional powers bordering the Mediterranean have long held an important role in British imperial strategy and foreign policy. Of those European states with access to that sea, Italy was one of the most significant. Prior to unification, Piedmont was viewed as an important strategic buffer between France and Austria, which prevented either from dominating the central Mediterranean. The existence of a unified, stable and friendly state to act as a counterweight to France was a major contributing factor to subsequent British support for the “Risorgimento”.¹ In the 19th Century, French naval concentrations in the region, and their conceptual development of the *Jeune Ecole* threatened Britain's vital “strategic corridor”. Concerns over this and the threat from Russia led to the 1887 Mediterranean Agreement between Britain, Italy and Austria-Hungary, wherein Italy again played a stabilising role.² It was to play a similar part in British strategy after entering the First World War, being charged with containing the Austro-Hungarian Navy and safeguarding maritime communications. Relations remained broadly cordial after the rise of Fascism. Barring occasional diplomatic incidents and some competition in the Middle East, the first dozen years of Mussolini's regime had been marked by general harmony and cooperation.³ In 1933, while beset by financial constraints, the British Cabinet had gone so far as to categorise Italy alongside France and America as a friendly power against whom no significant defence preparations were required.⁴

The benevolence with which Italy had been viewed made Italian agitation over Abyssinia in 1935 come as something of a shock to the British, causing a step-change in Anglo-Italian relations. Whilst London was well aware that Mussolini had further

imperialist designs in Africa, it was thought that these could be managed through diplomacy. British representatives had made their opposition to any Italian aggression clear both at the Stresa Conference and to the Italian ambassador.⁵ Despite these warnings, the Italians invaded their fellow member of the League of Nations, the last independent African state, on 3 October 1935. As Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey was to note in early 1936, “...strained relations or war with Italy were the last thing anyone expected.”⁶ This increasingly aggressive expansionism began a period of almost ceaseless tension between Britain and Italy, which saw genuine potential for direct conflict from 1935-40, followed by outright war from 1940-43. As Robert Mallet has demonstrated, the Italian Navy – or *Regia Marina Italiana* (RMI) - was central to these imperialist ambitions and to Italian efforts to project power across the Mediterranean.⁷ Without it, Italy would have been unable to build an overseas empire, let alone maintain one. The primarily maritime lines of communication between Rome and its erstwhile imperial possessions meant that, in any future conflict, events at sea would be pivotal in deciding the outcome.

The RMI thus formed an important influence on British imperial defence policy and war planning in the late 1930s, drawing in naval resources Britain would often have preferred to allocate closer to home or in the Far East. It was during the Second World War that makers of British strategic policy most completely saw the empire as an inter-connected entity, and strived for a centralised co-ordination of imperial resources.⁸ The RMI, however, constrained Britain's ability to send precious resources through the Mediterranean to defend her empire in the Far East and threatened positions in the Middle East and North Africa. In spite of its importance, there has been no dedicated study of British perceptions of the RMI from the first direct Italian aggression in 1935 through to the armistice of 1943.⁹ Instead, the existing literature is segmented; focusing on the distinct periods of the Abyssinian crisis and the Second World War, with some limited coverage of the intervening period.

This article addresses this lacuna by delivering the first comprehensive assessment of British views of Italian naval power from the Abyssinian crisis through to the Second World War. It demonstrates that pre-war appreciations consistently (and incorrectly) viewed the Italian Air Force (*Regia Aeronautica Italiana* or RAI) and submarine service as significant threats, but that these changed dramatically after the declaration of war and early experiences of combat. By contrast, there was in fact a

remarkable degree of continuity in perceptions of the RMI throughout the whole period, which were broadly consistent across the Cabinet, Foreign Office, Chiefs of Staff (COS), Admiralty and Royal Navy (RN). The RMI was always viewed as vastly inferior to the RN, but as a force capable of inflicting sufficient damage to seriously hamper British ability to deliver imperial defence across the globe, or to conduct a world war against multiple nations across multiple theatres. This view persisted even after important defeats were inflicted on it in 1940-41, and it continued to influence British strategy and operations and tie down resources right through to the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. This article advances our understanding of British imperial defence, grand strategy and decision making before and during the Second World War, as well as their conduct of wartime operations, by demonstrating the influence their perceptions of the RMI had on them.

Scholarship on the Abyssinian Crisis has been largely focused on issues of international diplomacy, collective security and the League of Nations. However, Arthur Marder has covered the position and role of the RN during the crisis, providing analysis of British perceptions of the RMI and the influence these assessments had on British strategic and operational thinking.¹⁰ This has received expansion from Steven Morewood, who offers a counter-factual assessment of the course of any direct Anglo-Italian conflict over Abyssinia, based on analysis of British perceptions of the RMI in both qualitative and quantitative terms.¹¹ Both authors emphasise persuasively how the RN expected to triumph with ease should war occur. For the period from the end of the crisis through to the start of the Second World War, Lawrence Pratt's seminal study of British strategic policy in the Mediterranean contains material on perceptions of the Italian armed forces, and especially the RMI.¹² Yet Pratt offers limited examination as to whether there is a link between these perceptions and British actions. Similarly, two studies of pre-war naval planning do not assess the issue of perceptions and their influence. Reynolds M. Salerno places British, French and Italian naval planning within the context of the origins of the Second World War, but offers little on how they viewed each other.¹³ Christopher M. Bell has analysed the use of sea power in British plans for war with Italy during the 1935-39 period, but its focus on the evolution of strategy and war planning does not incorporate how the Admiralty, RN or Cabinet viewed their potential adversary.¹⁴ Finally, Morewood's work on British plans for the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal includes references

to their perceptions of the RMI and their influence, but focused specifically within this discrete area of imperial defence.¹⁵

The historiography relating to Britain and Italy in the Second World War has focused rather heavily on the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean and debates over military effectiveness of the RMI.¹⁶ These rarely touch on what the British *thought*, even though this is vital to understanding their decision making. Several play to a concept that British perceptions were utterly dismissive, and this is epitomized by Samuel Eliot Morison, who infamously claimed that in 1942 “There was also the Italian Navy to guard against, on paper; but the ‘Dago Navy’ had long been regarded by British Tars as a huge joke”.¹⁷ Stephen Roskill does make reference to influence, stating that while militarily ineffective, the RMI still tied down British resources.¹⁸ Yet how and why it did so is hardly explored within the multi-volume narrative, and Roskill's later work makes no such similar claim. Other series of the British official histories also leave the issue of perception underexplored.¹⁹ Elsewhere, authors have claimed the RMI conceded “moral ascendancy” to the RN and influence ceased after the losses at Taranto and Cape Matapan.²⁰ As a rare exception, Angelo Caravaggio has stressed continued RMI influence after Taranto, but uses only published sources and sticks to specifically RN perceptions, rather than including views from Whitehall, and thus influence at the grand strategic level.²¹ These oversights in the historiography have obscured the manner in which perceptions of the RMI helped to shape the evolution of British grand strategy from the pre-war period through to the Second World War.

The Abyssinian Crisis

The first time the possibility of war with Italy was really considered at the Cabinet level was in July 1935. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin asked the COS for an appreciation of the military implications of applying economic pressure to Italy through sanctions.²² The Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Admiral Chatfield, considered that exercising economic pressure on the Italians might lead them to “commit an act of war” against British forces or imperial possessions - a so-called “mad dog” act. Chatfield cautioned that “It would put us in a position of grave disadvantage if we postponed the necessary preparations for war until the moment when it had been decided to commence the exercise of pressure.”²³ The COS and

Hankey concluded the meeting in agreement on this point, and that full preparation for war should be made, including efforts to secure the cooperation of France. A subsequent report by the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) further reinforced this thesis.²⁴

At the next COS meeting in August, Chatfield reiterated that the Mediterranean Fleet strength was inadequate for the tasks it may have to carry out as a deterrent or in the event of war. It would have to be reinforced, while the Home Fleet would need to be sent to Gibraltar in the event of hostilities.²⁵ This concern was shared in the Foreign Office. The Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Robert Vansittart told his superior, Samuel Hoare, that "...the Mediterranean Fleet is probably at present too weak to look after itself vis-à-vis Italy, and if any serious trouble were possible it would have to be reinforced." After the collapse of the Anglo-French-Italian conference in Paris shortly afterwards, he repeated the argument to Anthony Eden; "...you are faced with a first-class international crisis. We have got to reinforce the Mediterranean Fleet."²⁶ Reflecting on the COS meeting that had recommended reinforcing the Mediterranean, Chatfield confessed to Vansittart that "...it would be a dangerous prospect for us to go to war with Italy with the British Fleet unmobilised [sic]."²⁷ The Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral W.W. Fisher, agreed. He consistently urged London to send all available reinforcements and suggested the Home Fleet should be based at Malta. He went on to say that any hostile act by Italy should be met by an immediate, powerful counteroffensive, but conceded it would have to await the juncture of the two fleets for decisive superiority.²⁸

It was clear to all that the Mediterranean Fleet would have to be reinforced due to the possibility of combat with the RMI. The debate was over how much to reinforce it, and it spilled beyond the Cabinet, COS and RN. An out of favour Winston Churchill waded in from his home in Chartwell, claiming that the Mediterranean Fleet "...is on paper - that is all we are justified in going by - far weaker than the Italian Navy", and expressed particular concerns over Italian superiority in modern cruisers, destroyers and submarines. He received an assurance from Hoare in reply that his comments were being discussed, and they certainly echoed the concerns of many in the government and armed forces at that time.²⁹

Later that month, the Cabinet concluded that the Mediterranean Fleet should be reinforced by such forces that the Admiralty "deemed desirable", and that the

Home Fleet should be readied to sail to Gibraltar if the Italians did not back down.³⁰ An aircraft carrier, two flotillas of destroyers and one of submarines were released from the Home Fleet, but the bulk of it remained on readiness at Portland to sail at a later date. The RN would also not be fully mobilised. The difficulty was striking a balance between having a sufficiently strong force to deter Italian action or easily defeat the RMI, but not to send so much that it might *precipitate* Italian action. As Chatfield cautioned Fisher:

“The Cabinet wanted me to send you at once all the reinforcements I had envisaged...It was their view that to send out everything and the Home Fleet to Gibraltar would act as a deterrent to Mussolini but I had to point out the danger if they proved incorrect as the Foreign Office so often are.”

He concluded by stating that heavy reinforcement could have the effect of “touching off the excitable Itali” and plunging Britain into war in unfavourable circumstances. He thus opposed the sending of battle cruisers despite a clear need for them on similar grounds.³¹

Chatfield’s concern over the possibility of a “mad dog” act were understandable given the signs coming from Rome, where the British ambassador, Eric Drummond, warned of such a possibility throughout the summer. He suggested in late August that the likelihood had significantly increased. Britain suffered from a paucity of multi-source intelligence on Italian intentions and capabilities at this stage, and so lacked the means to challenge such assumptions.³² Yet Chatfield's response to Fisher should not be taken to suggest that he, the other COS or members of the Cabinet, felt that the final result of a war with Italy would ever be in doubt. The feeling among them was that if war came, triumph over the RMI was practically guaranteed. Chatfield was confident that “...if Italy is mad enough to challenge us...she will be defeated”.³³ As he told his fellow COS, it was doubtful that the RMI “would ever really prove efficient at sea.”³⁴ This belief was widely held within the service. Fisher expected to be able to “blow the Italians out of the water with the ordinary Mediterranean Fleet.”³⁵ Roger Backhouse, C-in-C of the Home Fleet, thought a “strong beginning” against the RMI would break the fragile morale present in a “Latin race.” Similar sentiments were expressed by other RN officers.³⁶

The primary threat to the RN was considered to come from the air. Italy was known to have been increasing its expenditure on the RAI and expanding it, particularly in terms of bomber forces. By 1935, the majority of these were based in

Sicily, Southern Italy and Libya, within easy striking distance of Malta.³⁷ Malta, and especially the Mediterranean Fleet if it was anchored there, was expected to be the first target of any Italian aggression. This attack was expected to be delivered through air power, and likely air power alone.³⁸ Naval bombardment by the RMI was broadly dismissed as improbable by the COS and the JPC, with only Backhouse suggesting it could occur had advantageous circumstances presented themselves to the RMI. An attempt at an amphibious landing was viewed as even less likely.³⁹ Such appreciations were indeed highly accurate, as although Mussolini had instructed the head of the RMI to develop plans for an attack on Malta, Admiral Domenico Cavagnari viewed it as both unnecessary and highly unlikely to deliver long-term success. He suggested instead focusing on opportunistic attacks in the Sicilian Channel, particularly using submarines, light forces and aircraft.⁴⁰ This was to be very similar to his recommendation in 1939-40.

The question of the air threat to Malta and the RN fits in with the broader simultaneous “bombs vs. battleships” debate.⁴¹ Warships were viewed as particularly vulnerable to air power in the Mediterranean due its enclosed nature and the position of mainland and island bases giving comparatively easy coverage for long range aircraft. Influential voices were arguing that air power had rendered the central Mediterranean untenable for British merchant shipping and warships. Basil Liddell-Hart had claimed that shipping would have to be re-routed around the “Cape route” south of the African continent in 1925.⁴² A Royal United Services Institute gold medal winning essay articulated something very similar in 1935, claiming “If the British fleet could be threatened with such damage that it would be forced to withdraw from the Mediterranean, or it could be denied the use of its bases, control or partial control of a section of the Mediterranean route might pass to the hostile power.”⁴³ The view was pervasive. A lengthy joint report by the Admiralty and Board of Trade recommended that in the event of war with Italy, all trade should be diverted via the cape due primarily to the threat of air power and submarines. The Defence Policy and Requirements Committee of the CID approved this position in September.⁴⁴

Malta was acknowledged to be a vital fleet base in the event of war with Italy thanks to its central location and extensive dockyard facilities. In spite of these facts, the decision was taken to withdraw the Mediterranean Fleet due to the threat of the RAI, and it sailed for Alexandria on 29 August. The island would still be defended,

but would only house aircraft for doing so - the fleet could only contribute remotely from an unfavourable position in Egypt. The proposal for an alternative fleet base at Navarino on the Greek Adriatic coast (codenamed "Port X") was also suspended indefinitely due to being within easy reach of the RAI.⁴⁵ The perceived RAI threat was exacerbated by faulty intelligence assumptions. These inflated Italian accuracy in port bombing, and the anti-shipping capabilities of the new SM. 81 bomber, which actually suffered from serious technical problems and lacked armour-piercing bombs.⁴⁶ There were also overestimations of the training and will of the RAI aircrews, with Drummond even rather gullibly giving credence to the rumour of a crack "suicide squadron" of up to 200 volunteers, who were ready to make kamikaze-style attacks on the RN and perhaps London!⁴⁷ British financial stringency since 1918 had forced them to abandon widespread human intelligence gathering in Italy long before this point. Signals intelligence was unable to add much clarity at this stage either, as the RAI's high-grade cypher was not broken until 1938. As such, there was no robust network through which to challenge these assumptions, which would later prove vastly over-inflated.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the RMI threat was not discarded, and it was seen as key that RN deployments in the theatre were kept at a high level in order to act as an effective deterrent. Backhouse warned that if the Italians realised that the RN, having left Malta, was concentrated fully in the eastern Mediterranean, they might use the RMI to bombard targets in the Western basin or attack trade there. He strongly urged the stationing of battle cruisers at Gibraltar, suggesting that even one could have a "steadying effect" on the Italy.⁴⁹ A major detachment of the Home Fleet was sent there a week later, including the capital ships *Hood* and *Renown*.⁵⁰ By late September, the RN commitment across the theatre was huge, dwarfing the RMI in terms of capital ships (5:2 in battleships and 2:0 in battle cruisers) and carriers (2:0).⁵¹ Even then, concerns were expressed over basing issues, insufficient destroyers and the Italian submarine menace, but Hoare assured the Cabinet that the large-scale deployment had rendered the possibility of Italian attacks on British interests much reduced.⁵²

The perceived need for numerical superiority over the RMI and for a swift victory in the event of conflict persisted after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October. When the French Foreign Minister seemed to suggest that RN deployment was too extensive, the British ambassador assured him that "...present British naval strength in the Mediterranean could be trusted to deal with any 'mad dog' act" but any

significant reduction could lead the "...Italian Government to think they could attack us, if not with impunity, at least with the possibility of inflicting serious losses". The ambassador was clear in his message that reductions in RN strength could make an Italian attack more likely, and thus increase the likelihood of French involvement.⁵³

When Italy also raised the possibility of some British capital ships being withdrawn in order to encourage detente, it was discussed regularly in the Cabinet over October and early November. After the government agreed that the withdrawal of two battle cruisers would be possible in return for a marked reform of rhetoric from the Italian press and large troop reductions in Libya, Chatfield responded robustly. The proposition of weakening the RN commitment was unacceptable; the most he could offer was to detach ships from the Home Fleet at Gibraltar to send home for refits and delayed leave for personnel.⁵⁴ The notion collapsed. By December, the Cabinet felt obliged to veto the compromise of withdrawing two battleships from the eastern basin for required refit and replacing them with a battle cruiser. Numbers were required, and despite the need for refits and personnel changes, a more suitable time would have to be awaited.⁵⁵

Despite concern over a possible "mad dog" act having been on the wane over early 1936, the RN commitment in the Mediterranean remained. The First Lord of the Admiralty spoke at length before the Cabinet of the exceptional strain that had been placed on the RN to sustain such a high level of commitment without full mobilisation and that "We could not afford to overlook Japan".⁵⁶ Yet it was only in March 1936 that agreement was reached in the Cabinet for the withdrawal of a single capital ship, the discussion of which brought protests from men on the spot. In his response to Backhouse, Chatfield explained that he did not like weakening the forces in the theatre, but that the manning situation was critical, and this was the least risky time at which to make the move.⁵⁷

By this time, dangers elsewhere were also increasing. Continued Japanese aggression over Manchuria and the German reoccupation of the Rhineland were forcing the British to reconsider their Mediterranean commitments once again. A series of Italian victories in Abyssinia were also making it clear that the end of the war was approaching, while the League continued to debate and postpone decisions over oil sanctions. The war effectively ended with the flight of Emperor Haile Selassie and the fall of Addis Ababa in early May. The crisis was essentially over,

with sanctions ending in July, the withdrawal of large quantities of Anglo-French naval forces and the return of the Mediterranean Fleet to Malta.

It is clear that the British did not entertain any possibility of defeat in the event of war with Italy, even if they had to fight alone and from a disadvantageous position. However, while there were potential advantages to a war that ended in swift victory, it was ultimately something to be avoided for two primary reasons. First, there was the risk of driving Italy and Germany closer together, with the subsequent multi-fronted danger to the empire. This in turn could provide further opportunities for an expansionist Japan. It was a situation which available intelligence suggested the Italians appreciated.⁵⁸ Second, and interlinked, was that although fighting a losing cause, the Italians would still likely inflict some losses through *both* air and sea power. Losses or serious damage to major units of the RN would be particularly hurtful to Britain's global imperial position. Germany and Japan were increasingly hostile powers, and such losses would hamper the ability to defend the homeland, imperial possessions and communications both at home and in the Far East. For the latter, this included the Admiralty's "Singapore Strategy" – a plan to send a fleet through the Mediterranean to defend the naval base there against Japanese aggression.⁵⁹ As Vansittart aptly summarised; "...we must never forget surely that we now have no naval margin at all, and the loss of one or two ships even would be a very serious matter for us."⁶⁰ The CID reached the same conclusion, warning;

"If the fleet is involved in active operations...it must be expected that losses will ensue...There is bound to be a danger, therefore, that the results of a war with Italy would be to leave the British fleet temporarily weakened to such an extent as to be able to fulfil its worldwide responsibilities."⁶¹

It was for this reason that the CID recommended taking all possible actions to be prepared for war, but also to avoid it.

Evidently, the British perceived the RMI as a markedly inferior force in all senses, and less of a threat to the RN than the RAI or Italian submarines. Yet they felt it still retained the potential to inflict very unwelcome losses. While there were subtle differences, these perceptions were broadly consistent across key governmental decision makers and military personnel. This view persisted even after massive reinforcement of the Mediterranean gave the RN major superiority. Chatfield noted in September, "It is a war which, if it takes place, there could be no doubt as to its end; we shall have many losses in ships and men, thereby our world position as a naval

power will be weakened.”⁶² Any losses incurred would be very unlikely to affect the outcome of an Anglo-Italian war, but they would greatly hamper Britain's ability to provide global imperial defence and power projection with an already overstretched navy. Several Cabinet sub-committees repeatedly postulated that a great increase in naval construction would be required if war were to occur, so as to replace these losses and allow wider imperial defence to continue effectively.⁶³ Such construction would of course take time, and this issue was critical in the face of an increasingly hostile Germany and Japan, who could well seize any opportunity presented by a weakened RN. As such, British perceptions of the RMI represented one of several factors that dictated inaction and appeasement over Abyssinia. These perceptions were to remain largely unchanged after the crisis had abated.

Appeasement, War Planning and the Approach of War, 1936-1939

As the Abyssinian Crisis abated, the COS urged the Cabinet to pursue detente with Italy even more vigorously. Central to this argument was the need to provide security in the Far East:

“... it is of paramount importance to British strategical interests that we should be free from commitments in the Mediterranean if our defence arrangements are to prove adequate to deal with a threat of hostilities in the Far East or at Home and to give us breathing space in which to recondition the services. It is evident that to achieve this we must return as soon as possible to a state of friendly relations with Italy”.

This strategic outlook was one of the key factors underpinning British acquiescence in the ending of sanctions on Italy, and later recognition of their annexation of Abyssinia.⁶⁴

Over most of 1936-38, the British government pursued a policy of appeasement towards Italy, consistently attempting to reduce Anglo-Italian tension despite increasing Italian military involvement in the Spanish Civil War. This policy was exemplified by the conclusion of the Anglo-Italian Agreements of 1937 and 1938.⁶⁵ It was only the Italian invasion of Albania, which “irrevocably” committed Italy to the Axis, and shattered any remaining notions (such as that held by Chamberlain) that Mussolini could be a partner in the maintenance of peace. If this

needed any further confirmation, it came with the signing of the Pact of Steel the next month.⁶⁶

This seemingly weak diplomacy from the British was underpinned by the same dilemmas of imperial defence and naval overstretch as during the Abyssinian crisis. As Chatfield pointed out to the new C-in-C Mediterranean, Dudley Pound; if he was getting the impression that the British government was afraid of consolidating the Mediterranean position for fear of hurting Italian feelings, it would be incorrect.

Instead:

“There are two points of view about the Italians which have to be considered. The first is that they are thoroughly untrustworthy and probably little better fighters than they used to be, are insolent and bombastic, and the best thing would be to teach them a lesson and answer threat by threat; and the second is that the Mediterranean position is only one of three anxieties (Germany and Japan are the other two), and as we are hopelessly weak to meet the responsibilities of all three services, and so long as we cannot come to terms with either of our two chief opponents, it will be better in the long run to get an agreement with Italy because we have no basic cause of enmity with that country, as we have with the other two. I think this latter factor, together with the unreadiness I have referred to, has really dominated the thoughts of the CID.”

It was a view Pound quickly came to appreciate.⁶⁷

As was the case during the Abyssinian Crisis, there was still consensus that in the event of war, the defeat of the RMI was practically guaranteed. Pound had gotten the chance to personally assess the RMI up close during their visit to Malta in August 1938. He, along with his staff, were quick to conclude that it had not improved in terms of efficiency in operation and remained “second rate”.⁶⁸ By the close of 1938, the British naval attaché in Rome was reporting that the RMI possessed a well-balanced fleet which was aptly suited for Italian regional requirements, with efficient personnel at the petty officer level. Its modernized battleships, while notably inferior to the RN's *Queen Elizabeth* class, were still fast and powerful. New battleships under construction were likely to be much closer to a match for the RN, but were running behind schedule. Nevertheless, he reported that the Italian officers lacked confidence and that the RMI as a whole was a collection of “fair weather sailors”. They were

capable of acts of courage and individual brilliance, but were susceptible to a quick blow to morale.⁶⁹

The view that the RAI was the bigger threat remained, although the wild over-assessments of capability that had crept through from some sources during the Abyssinian crisis seem to have ceased. Both the Cabinet, COS and RN commanders in theatre expressed concern over the possibility of the Italians creating a new base in the Balearics, but stressed that the danger would be from air power based there, not sea power, which could only really threaten the French.⁷⁰ The COS believed in early 1937 that Italy probably possessed the most up to date front line aircraft among the western powers at that stage, but lacked the industrial capacity to build up front line strength and reserves at the same time. Instead they would probably be forced to concentrate on the latter, thus reducing the front line threat. Similarly, the Foreign Office's Annual Embassy Report for 1937 highlighted the technical modernity of the RAI front line aircraft, but a slow projected speed of expansion due to a combination of industrial weakness and a lack of trained aircrew to man new construction. In a sentiment echoed by the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) in 1939, it suggested that the RAI had a small cadre of highly trained pilots, and an "unpretentious majority" of more moderate skill.⁷¹

After the hype about the extreme threat it represented in 1935-36, views had clearly softened. This was at least in part due to improved intelligence, as the RAI high-grade cypher was broken in 1938, while the Spanish Civil War offered an opportunity to observe them operating. By Christmas 1938, the air attaché in Rome was able to conclude that the RAI possessed the equipment, personnel and training to strike a series of powerful early blows, but lacked the depth for sustained operation; "Today, therefore, the Italian Air Force is in no position to enter a war of the first magnitude with any hope of pursuing it successfully once the initial blow has spent itself."⁷² As in 1935-36, air power was perceived as the greatest threat to Malta. The debate over the threat, and the closing of the Mediterranean, continued. It was sufficiently serious that by 1939 the CID recommended some modification of the policy of absolute priority for the air defence of Great Britain in order to allow provision of AA guns, equipment and RDF to Malta, along with Gibraltar and Alexandria to a lesser extent.⁷³

By the time of the Munich crisis, the issue of potential British naval commitments being stretched beyond breaking point was reaching a new peak. The

First Lord informed his Cabinet colleagues that the crisis could not have come “...at a time less desirable from the naval point of view.” The period from summer 1937 to spring 1939 had been identified as a period of particular vulnerability in terms of capital ships - no new vessels would come into service during this period, while three of the older ones were undergoing extensive repair. Two others were out of action for shorter periods for minor refits and rearming. The situation forced the withdrawal of additional forces from the Malta and the eastern Mediterranean to Gibraltar and Britain in order to meet the potential German threat.⁷⁴ The RN simply did not have the capacity to face both the RMI and guarantee home security during this window of Axis opportunity.

As it became increasingly clear that war with Italy was on the horizon, debate over how to conduct it in the maritime realm intensified. There were essentially two main schools: those who argued for a quick “knockout blow” against Italy that would allow for concentration on Germany afterwards, and those who favoured a slower method of economic strangulation by blockade.⁷⁵ One of the biggest proponents of the knockout method was Admiral Drax, who had been drafted in to the planning process. One of his first contributions to the debate stressed that “...when dealing with a country so inferior to us in naval strength as Germany or Italy, there is every reason to start with a vigorous offensive.” He saw the elimination or negation of the RMI as key, and advocated its destruction at sea where possible, and the blockading of it in port for attack by air power where it was not. Key Italian ports, aerodromes and coastal facilities should also be bombarded by the RN, which would probably result in a collapse of Italian national morale.⁷⁶

It is significant to note, however, that even within his ultra-aggressive mantra, Drax allowed for potential problems that could be caused by the RMI. He was clear that in order to safeguard Malta, Britain and France would not just need at least air parity with Germany and Italy, but *clear naval superiority* in the Mediterranean. Forces designated to bombard the Italian mainland should also be sufficiently powerful in capital ships and cruisers to deal with significant RMI opposition as it would almost certainly sail in force in order to defend the mainland. Indeed, the question of quantitative superiority remained vital for offensive operations; Drax urged pre-emptive action in early 1939 while the Anglo-French advantage over the RMI’s two operational battleships was huge. His worry was that “By the end of 1939 they may have 6, which would make the Mediterranean situation far more difficult.”⁷⁷

Clearly, even for one of the biggest proponents of the knockout school, the RMI was a force that represented an extant threat, and should be dealt with properly in the most advantageous circumstances possible.

The knockout school had a powerful champion in the form of a new First Lord; Winston Churchill. In a 1939 “Memorandum on Sea Power”, he proclaimed that in the event of war with Italy “England’s first battlefield is the Mediterranean.” Churchill was clear that a quick knockout could be achieved within two months, and that destruction of the RMI was a key facet of the strategy. He was uniquely bullish in that he dismissed the threat not just of the RMI, but also of their submarines and downplayed that of the RAI. Yet even Churchill, as the most dismissive voice regarding the RMI and the Italians in general, admitted the importance of the addition of the French fleet and bases to success in the Mediterranean.⁷⁸ His views must also be seen within the context of his plans for war with Japan. A quick knockout blow would allow a powerful RN fleet to be sent to the Singapore, and curtail any Japanese hopes of advancing so far from their home bases.⁷⁹ The addition of French forces in defeating the RMI would help prevent the latter from inflicting on losses on what would then become the Singapore fleet.

For Pound, the greatest threat remained the RAI, followed by submarines, both of which had demonstrated some potential during the Spanish Civil War. He cautioned that “Italy will not fail to make use of her advantageous geographical position and of her strength in long range aircraft.” Air power still offered the greatest threat to Malta, and defences should be built up accordingly. The RAI posed a major threat to the RN at sea or in port, while some damage to the Mediterranean fleet from Italian submarines had to be expected, if only due to their sheer quantity. Yet while prioritising the other threats, Pound had clearly not discounted the RMI. He recommended the Mediterranean Fleet should have at the outset three battleships, a carrier, four heavy and four light cruisers in order to deal with an estimated two Italian battleships, four heavy and eight light 6in cruisers - a clear superiority in capital ships. He would also need 36 destroyers to balance Italian destroyer strength and provide other duties, while further capital ship and cruiser reinforcements should be sent when possible. The Admiralty agreed, indicating that the force, plus an additional light cruiser, would be in place by April 1939.⁸⁰ A later signal from Pound also makes it clear that although he ranked the danger of the RMI as less than that of aircraft or submarines, the threat was still extant. This danger increased if the RMI

were to be used in conjunction with the other arms, and intimated in August that the situation would be greatly altered once the Italians could deploy six capital ships.⁸¹

For the COS, the question of deterring the Italians from entering the war by a demonstration of naval strength, as they had acted in 1935, was an exceedingly difficult one. It was felt that the Italians would only be deterred if it was clearly obvious to them that defeat would result. The problem was, as Pound had conceded, that the danger of the RMI was magnified when placed in conjunction with the RAI and submarine fleet;

“While we could probably spare some capital ships from Home waters, we cannot spare any destroyers, and this lack of destroyers is the governing factor in any British naval reinforcements that could be sent to the Mediterranean. The despatch of two or three battleships alone might be suitable as a deterrent so long as Italy is neutral; but without destroyers they would be immobilised in the event of war, and would be exposed to intensive submarine and air attack without achieving any useful purpose. Their despatch might thus conceivably have the reverse effect to that intended.”

In fact, the CAS had warned almost exactly a year earlier that the RAI posed a great threat to any RN warships utilised in bombardments off the Italian coast. Losses and damage inflicted by the RAI would leave a weakened RN that could then be attacked by the RMI. Interestingly, this concern reflects Italian naval planning against Britain (and with France neutralised) in summer 1940 very closely. They hoped in the event of war to avoid early direct major fleet action, first depleting the RN heavily through air, submarine and light force attack, then finally committing their fleet at opportune moments. The idea of a knockout blow against Italy was thus shelved, and perceptions of the RMI had played a part in this, even if it was only a supporting one to their fellow service.⁸²

For most of the period from 1936-40 British policy towards Italy was underpinned by appeasement, driven through the prism of the ongoing simultaneous threats from Germany and Japan.⁸³ It is within this strategic context that British perceptions of the RMI sat. As had been the case during the Abyssinian crisis, they were governed by two main assumptions. The first was that the RMI was inferior to the RN, with lower quality warships and equipment, crews that were less well trained, and tactics that were poorly developed. The second was that despite its faults, it had the potential to cause losses or damage to major RN units just as the RAI and

submarine service did, and thus exacerbate the wider dilemma of imperial defence. Consequently, despite the perception of inferiority, the RMI should be engaged in favourable circumstances; ideally where it was greatly outnumbered and outgunned. Such a view was shared even by the most bullish advocates of the knockout school.

This problem was more acute than it had been during the Abyssinian crisis, as the delay of important refits, overhauls and personnel changes that had been postponed then were forced to come together at once before important new warship construction was completed. The RMI also had its own re-modernized and new construction battleships approaching, which would triple its load of capital ships and bring serious qualitative advancement from the two new vessels. There were also continued difficulties in achieving Anglo-French consensus as to a joint Mediterranean strategy. By April and May 1940, both had greatly reinforced their sea power, but joint strategy was elusive. While the British now envisioned only a holding strategy, the latter wanted “a vigorous offensive in the first hours of war” against Italy.⁸⁴

Ultimately, British pre-war strategy anticipated the closure of the Mediterranean to general shipping, but the expectation was because of the danger from *both* the RAI and RMI.⁸⁵ While the perceived threat of the RAI and the submarine fleet remained greater than that of the RMI, the former two had declined since the Abyssinian crisis in the face of improved British intelligence and observation of their actions in the Spanish Civil War, while the latter had remained constant. These comparative trajectories were to continue, and at a faster pace, once war became a reality.

War

The early stages of the Battle of France quickly made it clear that if Italy entered the war, Britain's key ally would likely not be available for long to assist in the Mediterranean. This was evidently in the Prime Minister's mind when he minuted the COS in late May;

“If France is still our ally after an Italian declaration of war, it would appear extremely desirable that the combined fleets, operating from opposite ends of the Mediterranean, should pursue an active offensive against Italy. It is important that at the outset, collision should take place both with the Italian

Navy and Air Force, in order that we can see what their quality really is, and whether it has changed at all since the last war. The purely defensive strategy contemplated by C-in-C Mediterranean ought not to be accepted unless it is found that the fighting qualities of the Italians are high. It will be much better that the fleet at Alexandria should sally forth and run some risks than it should remain in a posture so markedly defensive.”

Although couched in his usual belligerent manner, Churchill was evidently concerned that the loss of France would put the RMI on more of a level playing field.

Cunningham's response was that he and his men were anxious to “get at” the RMI. His first move would be a powerful sortie into the central Mediterranean to guarantee the safety of Malta.⁸⁶ This was indeed what he did on 11 June, shortly after the Italian declaration of war.

The sortie failed to make contact with the RMI and Cunningham found this lack of engagement “profoundly unsatisfactory”. He remained determined to bring them to battle as a vital tenet of knocking Italy out of the war.⁸⁷ Although the fall of France appeared imminent, the implications had only been discussed since late May. On 17 June, as the French requested an armistice, Pound circulated a revelatory suggestion put forward by the Admiralty's Director of Plans (DoP). It stated that with the loss of the French in the western basin, the eastern might be abandoned entirely, keeping the Fleet ensconced at Gibraltar instead. Revealingly, the reasons given for this included not just the threat of the RAI, but that there was also a need to have something substantial to stand between the RMI and the Atlantic. The proposal was soon quietly dropped, but these concerns contributed to the creation of Force H at Gibraltar and the attack on the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kebir.⁸⁸

It was not until July that the long awaited naval clash came, and it was to prove indecisive. The long range duel at Calabria saw no losses and scant damage to either side, but it was the Italians who disengaged first. This fact was pointed to by Cunningham in his belated report as evidence that they had gained “...a certain degree of moral ascendancy” over the Italians.⁸⁹ For their part, several senior Admirals in the RMI seem to have come away from Calabria feeling that the result was equal, or even that they had the better of it. The commander of the fleet at sea, Admiral Campioni, was highly positive. Admiral Paladini went a step further, claiming that it demonstrated “... our ability to cope with and beat the enemy.”⁹⁰ Cunningham's report conceded that he had opted against “playing the enemy's own game” and pursuing

them through a smokescreen, fearing a trap.⁹¹ Nevertheless, he was able to report to Pound that while the engagement was frustrating, nothing “very dashing” should be expected from the RMI. His main concern remained, as it had been before war, the RAI. This view was further entrenched after a successful cruiser-level engagement off Cape Spada later that month.⁹²

The opening five months at sea were marked by frustration and minor successes, and perceptions of the RMI remained essentially unchanged. Meanwhile, concerns over the vaunted Italian submarine fleet had quickly proven to be misplaced. Rapid expansion over the late interwar years had left it with numerous technical and tactical problems, while a lack of establishments meant the quality of training had not yet caught up with the expanded personnel numbers.⁹³ Despite a massive early deployment, with 49 vessels at sea on the opening night of war alone, they acted as little more than a paper tiger.⁹⁴ An impressive early success in sinking the cruiser *Calypso* was overshadowed by far more numerous errors. With the aid of intelligence, nine were sunk, one captured and others damaged in the first month of war, sometimes being caught when committing the cardinal sin of running on the surface in daytime.⁹⁵ This encouraged British views of poor training, which were reinforced by the capture of the *Galileo Galilei* in the Red Sea. Interrogation revealed that few of the crew had received specialised submarine training before being assigned, and levels of generalised training were low. They had received little opportunity to exercise at sea, having conducted just a single practice for gunnery and torpedo firing since arriving on station in February.⁹⁶

Poor training was exacerbated by tactical shortcomings and various technical problems across the different classes. A rigid tactical doctrine that was inflexibly administered hampered the ability of commanders to produce results, while technical problems led to a series of breakdowns in some classes.⁹⁷ Early observations from British anti-submarine operations, captured vessels and intelligence had given the RN a good indication of this, but it was truly driven home by the capture of the *Perla* in June 1942. An investigation into the vessel reported that “The mechanical conditions in the boat were deplorable, and it is a mystery how the Italians succeeded in operating the ship”, listing a vast number of faults in key systems.⁹⁸ Although numerous later tactical and technical developments, which led to limited improvement, British perceptions had been altered permanently. The Italian submarine fleet no longer caused notable concern. After a series of successes by

German U-boats shortly after arrival in autumn 1941, Somerville lamented to Cunningham "...we have had an easy time with the 'Iti' U-boats, but these Huns are a different proposition".⁹⁹

Much as with the submarine force, the RAI threat quickly proved to be exaggerated. Fears of immediate massed bombing of Malta never materialised. Theoretically there were 1,569 frontline Italian bombers available as of 1 June 1940, but only 783 were actually serviceable and many were required elsewhere. Just 35 were employed on the initial air raids and although this increased after the French armistice, many were soon transferred to other duties. After 10 months of war, the RAI had managed 103 operations against Malta with raids averaging just five aircraft in size. Their losses were significant, with 35 destroyed and over 200 damaged after six months.¹⁰⁰ Raids over 1941-42 were much larger, more frequent and more accurate, with a much higher proportion of German aircraft than Italian. From early 1941 onwards, British concerns over the island were all specifically related to *German* air power.¹⁰¹

Much the same story played out regarding the RAI threat to the RN and shipping at sea. The first indication that the pre-war threat was exaggerated came when the RAI failed to even make an appearance during the first wartime sortie of the Mediterranean Fleet. This came as a shock to Cunningham, who noticed their general inactivity over the first month of war, other than the bombing of Malta. Even a joint Anglo-French bombardment of Bardia did not bring an RAI reaction.¹⁰² The first significant meeting with the RAI came at Calabria, when the Mediterranean Fleet was bombed intensively, but with only a single damaging hit to the cruiser *Gloucester*. In a clear demonstration of the poor state of Italian air-sea integration, they also bombed the withdrawing RMI heavily. While not the most convincing performance, it was enough to keep Cunningham wary of them.¹⁰³

By November, Cunningham noted for the first time Italian bombers jettisoning their payloads and withdrawing rather than attacking the RN, if engaged by fighters. He would later see this as a propensity in their conduct. He went on to claim that a moral ascendancy had been gained over the RAI over both land and sea.¹⁰⁴ As with Malta, the air threat to the RN was quickly viewed as coming primarily, if not entirely, from the Germans.¹⁰⁵ It was not only British perceptions of the RAI that rapidly diminished. As early as January 1941, the German Military Attaché in Rome wrote that "The Italian Air Force has not been able fully to execute the tasks allotted

to it; its air attacks have had only slight effect and reconnaissance is carried out only in a very incomplete manner.”¹⁰⁶ Evidently, the perceived RAI threat was quickly and drastically revised downwards after the test of war. Such a view was accurate, as Santoni and Mattesini have demonstrated the overwhelming primacy of the Luftwaffe in comparison with the Italians in terms of effort and results in the air-sea conflict.¹⁰⁷

In November 1940, the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) made its famous strike on the RMI at Taranto. Three battleships sustained heavy damage, including one permanently disabled, and the fleet was relocated to ports further north. Unsurprisingly, this re-enforced perceptions of the RMI as unthreatening. Cunningham reported;

“Without indulging in speculation as to the political repercussions, it is already evident that this successful attack has greatly increased our freedom of movement in the Mediterranean and has thus strengthened our control of the central area of the sea. It has enabled two battleships to be released for operations elsewhere, while the effect on the morale of the Italians must be considerable.”

His assessment bought consensus. Churchill delighted the House of Commons when claiming it had decisively affected the balance of naval power across the globe; a claim he repeated to the War Cabinet and in his postwar writings. The Secretary of State for War – Anthony Eden - reported a devastating effect on the morale of the RMI.¹⁰⁸

Afterwards, Cunningham felt that the probability of the RMI concentrating to oppose a Malta supply run was at its most remote to date.¹⁰⁹ Such confidence was not widely pervasive, however, and the RMI retained influence. This was demonstrated when Somerville, with the smaller Force H, was tasked with organising and protecting these supply runs from Gibraltar through the western basin. Three days after Taranto, he undertook Operation White, to fly 12 Hurricanes to Malta from a carrier. At sea, he unexpectedly received a signal telling him the RMI had sailed. Fearing interception by a superior RMI force looking to “balance their losses from Taranto”, he ordered the fly-off much earlier than planned and turned back for Gibraltar. Although he felt that they were still in range of Malta, the operation was a disaster - nine aircraft were lost.¹¹⁰ Within days Force H was at sea again for another resupply effort, Operation Collar. In light of the previous events Somerville requested an extra battleship to protect against a clearly still influential RMI. The two clashed at the Battle of Cape

Spartivento. In a manner highly reminiscent of Calabria, it was an indecisive long range affair from which the Italians withdrew first and Somerville opted not to pursue.¹¹¹ After the battle, Somerville confided to his wife that he felt he had been “outmatched” by a superior Italian fleet.¹¹² His perception was shared within the RN and Admiralty, who backed him fully during the brief board of enquiry into the engagement, which found no misconduct. This consistent pattern of perception continued into the New Year. When the next major convoy to Malta ran in January 1941, Somerville again petitioned for greater capital ship reinforcements. Cunningham agreed sufficiently to send him two cruisers, as a battleship could not be spared.¹¹³ Although it sailed, the RMI failed to make contact, and the two fleets would not meet until the battle of Cape Matapan.

In the aftermath of this engagement, a buoyant Churchill felt able to boast of “The tearing up of the paper fleet of Italy.”¹¹⁴ While the battle ensured the RMI didn’t interfere with evacuations from Greece and Crete, it didn’t achieve its primary tactical objective - sinking the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*. Instead it would return to duty by August, which led Cunningham to report the battle as a qualified success.¹¹⁵ The continued influence of the fleet-in-being affected not just tactical decisions, but also wider operational ones, and this was appreciated in the Admiralty immediately. Shortly after the battle, the DoP devised an estimate of projected Axis naval strength in March 1942, predicting that the RMI would have returned to an operational strength of three fully modern and two re-modernized battleships, along with 14 cruisers of various types. This would necessitate a sizeable minimum RN commitment of three *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships, a carrier and 10 cruisers of mixed types, plus a large quantity of destroyers, in the eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, Gibraltar should house two battleships, a carrier, two cruisers and attendant destroyers.¹¹⁶

This continued influence over spring and summer 1941 is well illustrated through two examples. First, Churchill had been continually demanding the basing of surface forces at Malta to increase interdiction on the Italian supply route to Libya. This was opposed by both Pound and Cunningham, who advocated only the sending of more submarines and aircraft. Pound went so far as to say, “The Italians had shown themselves ready to escort their convoys by surface forces far more powerful than anything we could afford to base at Malta. Our small group of cruisers and destroyers could only exert a deterrent effect.”¹¹⁷ Second, the question of sending a large convoy

through the Mediterranean carrying most of a British division to North Africa was brought up in the War Cabinet in August. Pound pointed to the increased activity of Italian capital ships, including the return of those damaged at Taranto and Matapan. He claimed this meant a large convoy would require the escort of “...three battleships, two carriers and some cruisers”. Ultimately it was decided that the dangers of routing this convoy through the Mediterranean did not justify the diversion of naval resources, and it was sent later by the Cape route.¹¹⁸

Evidently, while both Taranto and Matapan represented important victories over the RMI, they had not removed the potential threat. It had to be managed and maintained, including the allocation of significant warships – while aircraft carriers might be used to oppose both air and sea attack, battleships and cruisers were almost exclusively for the latter. Major offensive operations that had been discussed and planned over 1941 had to be abandoned due to the continued existence of the RMI. Ambitious planning for an early invasion of Sicily was dropped in the autumn. It was deemed to be at a “now or never” state in late October, but quickly became a “never” because the RMI was still extant.¹¹⁹ A proposed raid on the port of Livorno met the same fate. Due to it involving sailing practically into the mouth of the Italian seaboard, it had been designed only to proceed if the RMI had been eliminated or it was felt that its morale had “cracked”. Evidently this was not perceived to be the case, as it was shelved indefinitely at the start of December.¹²⁰

Losses of key RN capital ships to German U-boats, increased German air power and renewed Italian activity late in the year also led to an escalation of British concerns. Cunningham expressed a reluctance to have his depleted capital ship force face the RMI. The Admiralty agreed, showing great consternation at the Italian superiority in battleships of 5:2, well below the minimum specified in April.¹²¹ When Italian Special Forces crippled the remaining two battleships in Alexandria, it forced the RN to allow any major RMI operations to go unopposed. After the Italians ran a major convoy to Libya in December (“M42”) under the cover of their entire fleet, Cunningham warned the Admiralty that “The enemy has experienced freedom of movement and must enjoy the taste...he will become more venturesome”. There is evidence of such increased confidence within the RMI in this period, and “M42” was followed by other “battleship convoys” in January.¹²² Meanwhile, the now depleted Force K was being ordered not intercept even the smaller enemy convoys due to increased Italian escort forces. Coupled with the entry of Japan to the war and

subsequent RN losses to them, the decision was taken for the British to keep the Mediterranean denuded of capital ships and instead attempt to control the sea with increased air power. The COS were clear that the RMI should become the primary target of any increased air component.¹²³

In spite of concerns over a lack of warships, a new Malta supply operation was desperately needed, and “MW10” sailed from Alexandria in March. To the concern of all, only a light escort was possible, which would be greatly outmatched by an RMI sortie in strength.¹²⁴ The following engagement came to be known as the Second Battle of Sirte. The weak escort fought a defensive action making heavy use of smokescreens, and although several warships received heavy damage, the merchant ships were untouched when the Italian force disengaged that night. All were later sunk at sea or at Malta by air attack in a major blow to the island, but the naval engagement was viewed as a triumph over a superior Italian force. Churchill congratulated the commander of the escort force, Rear Admiral Vian, on having “routed and put to flight” one of the “most powerful battleships afloat”.¹²⁵ Vian himself felt that the engagement had become “critical” at one stage and was very nearly a disaster. Yet when the report of the action was written three months later by a new C-in-C Mediterranean, Henry Harwood claimed that the Italians had been “driven off” in a “brilliant action”.¹²⁶ The Admiralty press release was quick not only to praise Vian but also to demonize the RMI, mocking their failure to destroy the convoy in spite of clear superiority.¹²⁷

The seeming “success” of the naval side of MW10 and apparent failure of the RMI led to a brief alteration in perceptions. While Vian viewed the Italians warily and felt fortunate, many in the RN and Cabinet saw the engagement as proof that even a weak escort was sufficient to safeguard major convoys. When Operation Harpoon was undertaken in June, it was felt by the commander, Vice Admiral Curteis that “Judging from past encounters with the Italians, the convoy escort was large enough to deter them from doing any harm to the convoy”.¹²⁸ Based on these perceptions, Curteis opted not to reinforce the light close escort (Force X) from his own force that included a battleship and two carriers, leaving Force X to face a roughly equal Italian force alone. It suffered heavy damage to multiple destroyers and its commander, Captain Hardy, felt compelled to scuttle one of them and two immobilised convoy ships, including a vital tanker. All but two merchant ships of the convoy were later sunk at sea by German aircraft, and it was Hardy’s appreciation that “But for the

enemy surface forces, these ships might have been brought in.”¹²⁹ Simultaneously, Operation Vigorous sought to supply Malta with a convoy through the eastern basin. Lacking the heavy ships for escort, Harwood’s solution had been to attempt to use air power alone. It demonstrated to him the fallacy of trying to do so. He was later to admit that “Events proved with painful clarity that our striking forces had nothing like the weight required to stop a fast and powerful enemy force, and in no way compensated for our lack of heavy ships.”¹³⁰

Any complacency in British perceptions were short lived, and Operation Pedestal was assigned a huge escort. Three carriers, two battleships, seven cruisers and 24 destroyers were used to protect it against both the Luftwaffe and the RMI.¹³¹ Even Churchill’s perceptions of the RMI had moved him to greater caution. During planning, he told the Cabinet that a decision had to be made whether or not to have two of the escorting battleships continue through to Malta, or turn them back at the last stage. Having them continue would expose them to greater air attack, but the alternative would expose the convoy to attack by superior RMI forces and likely heavy losses - a great change in demeanour. Pound was in agreement, feeling that as soon as the RMI learned that the heavier escorts had turned back, they would attack. His proposal was that everything possible should be done to weaken Italian capital ships and cruisers in advance through submarine and air attack.¹³² It was ultimately decided that they should turn back, but this discussion demonstrates that by August 1942 the RMI was once again being perceived as a threat to major British operations, and influencing the planning of them.

This effect persisted through the planning of the Anglo-American landings in Northwest Africa. In September, Pound told Harwood “...it will be essential to prevent or delay enemy reinforcements reaching Tunisia before we do. To this end operations will be necessary from Malta on the greatest scale possible”.¹³³ Yet after the losses of the previous three major convoys, all three RN submarine flotillas in the Mediterranean were re-tasked to patrol in a defensive posture against potential RMI sorties.¹³⁴ Even after the successful landings had taken place, and with US forces now available in the theatre, Cunningham urged caution:

“As long as the Italian fleet is in being and in a position to interfere a considerable force of capital ships and therefore cruisers is required...the Italian fleet will be a constant nuisance and menace to through convoys in the

Mediterranean and it must be our object to render it ineffective as soon as possible.”

He maintained this standpoint for the rest of the year, and was quick to counter opposing views, ensuring strong escort was given.¹³⁵

RMI influence extended to the planning for the invasion of Sicily (Operation Husky). The question of landing points was heavily debated, with much support for simultaneous landings at either end of the island. During the early planning, the Joint Planning Staff had noted that prior action would need to be taken to force the RMI up into Adriatic. That way a single powerful British battleship covering force could keep them bottled up there. Otherwise, it would present a much greater threat operating from ports on the northwest coast and would require a second American battleship covering force. If this was not available, they would have to limit the landings to a single end of Sicily, as they could not prevent the Italians from using the Straits of Messina. The RMI was also re-designated as a primary target for air attack, in order to immobilise it or force it to take refuge in the Adriatic.¹³⁶ Ultimately this was not achieved, and was one of several factors ensuring the allies were consigned to a limited landing area.

The orders for Husky recognised the potential threat of the RMI, especially now that their homeland was at stake: “It must, however, be recognised that if it is ever going to fight, it must fight now in defence of its country...and that it is strategically well placed to do so.”¹³⁷ The idea was shared by RN commanders in theatre. Admiral Willis, of Force H, warned that the RMI was still a formidable fleet on paper. He strongly advised repeated air attacks against Italian battleships and heavy cruisers to incapacitate or sink them, and for strong dedicated submarine patrols and torpedo bomber forces if they put to sea.¹³⁸ Just prior to Husky he issued tactical instructions noting “The importance of hitting the enemy before he hits us cannot be over-stressed, especially with regards to the Italians.” It reiterated the need to engineer a favourable engagement using submarines, air power and the cover of night in order to limit the RMI's capacity to inflict damage.¹³⁹ In the final stages of planning the naval side of the Sicilian landings, Cunningham feared that “If they should ever slip through the Allies’ cordon, and get mixed up in a convoy, they could be a jolly nuisance.”¹⁴⁰ It was only after the successful launching of the operation that perceptions definitively shifted. The RMI had not acted in any significant way to

defend Italian soil, while the deposition of Mussolini and the first secret Italian peace feelers all helped cement this.

Conclusions

Assessing how Britain viewed the armed forces of their enemies and potential enemies is vital for understanding their approach to imperial defence, grand strategy and military operations. The key opponent in the Mediterranean prior to and during the Second World War was the RMI, and yet British perceptions of it have not been fully interrogated until now. This article has demonstrated that there was in fact a remarkable degree of consistency in these perceptions from 1935-43 across key departments and personalities. It was always seen as greatly inferior to the RN, due to a combination of British intelligence, observation and experience of war with more deep-seated views. The British widely believed the RN was the world's premier naval power, and that the RMI had proven itself as both inferior and reticent to act over 1915-18 and were "...probably little better fighters than they used to be". This fits in with commonplace wider views of Italian military inferiority, which were often couched in highly xenophobic terminology - these were the people that Alexander Cadogan once derided as "the ice cream vendors".¹⁴¹ Yet in spite of this, the RMI always retained the potential to cause damage and loss to an overstretched RN that had commitments on a global scale. It thus exercised influence on British actions, both strategically and operationally.

Both the Abyssinian Crisis and the following pre-war period were characterised by the dilemmas of wider imperial defence. Any war with Italy would be won, and probably won with relative ease, but it would weaken Britain's ability to defend both the Mediterranean and its interests closer to home and in the Far East against aggression elsewhere by Germany or Japan. The greatest danger was damage to the overstretched RN, which was essential to providing security for the vital sea lines that linked the scattered imperial territories. This is why most of the period from 1936-40 British policy towards Italy was underpinned by appeasement. The concern was not over a war against Italy, so much as one in which they combined with Germany, or which Japan took advantage of to make their own attack on British possessions in the Far East. Worst of all would be war with all three. Even a war against Italy alone could present problems in British imperial defence as any losses

sustained would hamper their ability to fight either of the other powers in the future, before rearmament could catch up. Thus a victory over the RMI could still be damaging to Britain. If an unpredictable Mussolini was to commit a “mad dog” act he might, as Chatfield so succinctly summarised, “...say ‘Go to sea and do not return until you have damaged the British Fleet’”.¹⁴² As such, audacious offensive plans like Churchill’s “Mediterranean First” strategy or a knockout blow against Italy had to be consigned to the dustbin of history.

This is broadly the same manner in which the RMI was perceived in wartime. The only real difference was that in the pre-war period, the greatest threats to British Mediterranean control were deemed to come from the RAI and submarine fleet. Once war was underway, the fallacies of these perceptions were exposed, and Italian air and sub-surface power were quickly viewed as being of little consequence, being replaced instead by concerns over German U-boats and aircraft. The RMI was still very much viewed as inferior to the RN (and as a much lesser threat than German air power), but perceptions of it, whether within the cabinet, the Admiralty or the RN, stayed broadly consistent with the pre-war period.¹⁴³ It was seen as a significantly sized force of moderate technical quality that was poorly handled by inferior personnel. It retained the ability to do notable damage to the RN, especially if it could engage in favourable conditions, which were often presented (although almost never taken) thanks to the success of German air power in sinking RN vessels over 1941-42, or losses and demands from other theatres. This would hamper Britain's ability to simultaneously combat Germany, especially with France out of the war. This view was to become further entrenched when Japan entered the war, and the nightmare scenario became a reality with immediate losses to RN Capital ships in the Far East. Elimination of the RMI was thus seen as a high priority when the resources were available.

These perceptions endured despite key defeats that were inflicted on the RMI at Taranto and Cape Matapan, and its repeated failure to interrupt the Malta supply convoys. The continued existence of the fleet-in-being meant the British felt forced to allocate further warships in spite of the urgent need for them in other theatres. Operations and tactical instructions were modified based on the RMI's continued existence, while some of the more adventurous were cancelled entirely because of it. This influence persisted right up to the invasion of Sicily. On the few occasions that they did briefly alter, they quickly returned to the status quo. Understanding British perceptions is thus vital to comprehending not only their operations in the

Mediterranean, but also their grand strategy in the war. Far from being seen as a “huge joke”, the RMI maintained this influence consistently over 1935-43.

¹ Owain Wright, ‘British Foreign Policy and the Occupation of Rome, 1870’, *International History Review*, xxxiv (2012), 169-71.

² Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Planning, 1871-1904* (Annapolis, 1987), 122-31, 171, 210-5; on the Mediterranean Agreement see Jan Buben, ‘Mediterranean Agreement of Great Britain, Italy and Austria-Hungary from February-March 1887’ in Ales Skrivan (ed), *Prague Papers on the History of International Relations* (Prague, 1999), 131-52.

³ George W. Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 14-5.

⁴ CID 261st meeting, 9 November 1933, [Kew] T[he] N[ational] A[rchives] CAB 2/6.

⁵ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933-1939* (Oxford, 2013), 103. For a general background of the build up to the war prior to 1934, see Baer, *Italian-Ethiopian War*, ch. 1.

⁶ CP 30(36), CID, ‘Defence Co-ordination’, 7 February 1936, TNA CAB 24/259.

⁷ On the relationship between the RMI and the aims of the Fascist state see Robert Mallett, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism* (London, 1998).

⁸ Keith Jeffrey, ‘The Eastern Arc of Empire: A Strategic View, 1850-1950’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, v (1982), 534.

⁹ Broader works covering the Mediterranean in this period contain little reference to issues of perception. See for example Simon Ball, *The Bitter Sea: The Brutal World War II Fight for the Mediterranean* (London, 2010).

¹⁰ Arthur Marder, ‘The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935-36’, *American Historical Review*, lxxv (1970), 1327-56

¹¹ Morewood, ‘“This Silly African Business”: The Military Dimension of Britain’s Response to the Abyssinian Crisis’ in G. Bruce Strang (ed), *Collision of Empires: Italy’s Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact* (Farnham, 2013), 73-180.

¹² Lawrence R Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939* (Cambridge, 1975).

¹³ Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940* (Ithaca, NY, 2002); Salerno, ‘Naval Strategy and the Origins of the Second World War in the Mediterranean, 1938-1940’ in W. M. McBride and E. P. Reed (eds), *New Interpretations in Naval History: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Naval History Symposium* (Annapolis, MD, 1998), 152-76.

¹⁴ Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars* (Basingstoke, 2000), 117-25.

¹⁵ Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935-1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Abingdon, 2005).

¹⁶ See for instance the critical coverage in Corelli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy more Closely: The Royal Navy and the Second World War* (London, 1991), especially 508 and MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini*

Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War (Cambridge, 1982); Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime and the War of 1940-1943* (Cambridge, 2003). The extremely complementary James Sadkovich, 'Reevaluating Who Won the Italo-British Naval Conflict, 1940-42', *European History Quarterly*, xviii (1988); Sadkovich, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Westport, CT, 1994) and Marc'Antonio Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Annapolis, MD, 1957). The more middling Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean, 1940-1943* (London, 1998); Vincent O'Hara, *Struggle for the Middle Sea: The Great Navies at War in the Mediterranean Theatre* (Annapolis, MD, 2009).

¹⁷ Samuel E. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II* (15 vols, Boston, 1947), ii, 189.

¹⁸ Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945* (London, 3 vols, 2004 edition), i, 295.

¹⁹ See Roskill, *The Navy at War, 1939-1945* (London, 1960); Ian Playfair et al, *The Mediterranean and Middle East* (London, 6 vols, 1954-88); F.H. Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (London, 5 vols, 1979-90).

²⁰ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 164; John Robb-Webb, 'Sea Control in Narrow Waters: The Battles of Taranto and Matapan' in Ian Speller (ed), *The Royal Navy and Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2005), 33-49; Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, 263; Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston, 1949), 441; Barnett, *Engage the Enemy more Closely*, 221.

²¹ A. N. Caravaggio, 'The Attack at Taranto: Tactical Success, Operational Failure', *US Naval War College Review*, lix (2006), 103-127.

²² Marder, 1327.

²³ COS 146th Meeting, 5 July 1935, 2; COS 147th Meeting, 30 July 1935, pp. 1-2, TNA CAB 53/5.

²⁴ See COS 390 (J.P.), 'Military Implications of the Application of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations', 7 August 1935, TNA CAB 53/25.

²⁵ COS 148th Meeting, 8 August 1935, p. 3, TNA CAB 53/5.

²⁶ Vansittart to Hoare, 7 August 1935 in *D[ocuments on] B[ritish] F[oreign] P[olicy]*, ii, xiv, 465; Frank Hardie, *The Abyssinian Crisis* (London, 1974), 132.

²⁷ Chatfield to Vansittart, 8 August 1935, in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 471.

²⁸ Fisher to Admiralty, 20 August 1935, TNA ADM 116/3038.

²⁹ Churchill to Hoare, 25 August 1935; Hoare to Churchill, 27 August 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 737-8.

³⁰ Cabinet Conclusions 42(35), 22 August 1935, p. 10, TNA CAB 23/82.

³¹ Chatfield to Fisher, 25 August 1935, p. 1, N[ational] M[aritime] M[useum], [Chatfield Papers] CHT 11/2. Emphasis in original.

³² Drummond to Hoare, 22 August 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 528; on the lack of intelligence, see Morewood, 'Silly African Business', 79-80.

³³ Chatfield to Fisher, 25 August 1935, p. 2, NMM CHT 11/2.

³⁴ COS 150th Meeting, 13 September 1935, p. 6, TNA CAB 53/5.

³⁵ Morewood, "'This Silly African Business'", 96.

³⁶ Backhouse to Chatfield, 19 September 1935, p. 3, NMM CHT 4/1; see also the comment in Viscount Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey* (London, 1951), 173.

³⁷ For references to the locations of RAI forces, see for instance Admiralty to Fisher, 16 August 1935, TNA ADM 116/3476; COS 149th Meeting, 6 September 1935, p. 2 and COS 157th Meeting, 5 December 1935, p. 4, TNA CAB 53/5. Italian expenditure on the RAI had been increasing in total terms and proportionately among the Italian services since 1933, but did not overtake the RMI until 1936. See Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, appendix 2, 292-4.

³⁸ COS 157th Meeting, 5 December 1935, p. 4, TNA CAB 53/5.

³⁹ COS 149th Meeting, 6 September 1935, pp. 6-7, TNA CAB 53/5; COS 390 (J.P.), 'Military Implications of the Application of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations', 7 August 1935, p. 13, TNA CAB 53/25; D. Austin, *Malta and British Strategic Policy, 1925-1943* (London, 2004), 33; Backhouse to Chatfield, 19 September 1935, p. 5, NMM CHT 4/1.

⁴⁰ Mallett, *Italian Navy*, 34, 36 and minutes of the Italian Supreme High Command meeting, 13 August 1935 at 205-17.

⁴¹ For a guide to the highly contentious inter-service debate and various bombing experiments in this period see John Buckley, *The RAF and Trade Defence, 1919-1945* (Keele, 1995), 37-90. For the Admiralty perspective on the 1936 vulnerability of capital ships committee see Joseph Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship in the Interwar Period: An Operational Perspective* (London, 2002), 54-5.

⁴² Pratt, *East of Malta*, 10-1.

⁴³ R.A. Cochrane, 'The effect of the development of air power on British interests in the Mediterranean', *Royal United Services Institution Journal*, lxxxi, (1936), 242, 245-7, 259.

⁴⁴ N.H. Gibbs, *Grand Strategy* (6 vols, 1956-76), i, 198.

⁴⁵ Cabinet Conclusions 42(35), 22 August 1935, p. 10, TNA CAB 23/82; Austin, *Malta*, 33-38; Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*, 56-7.

⁴⁶ Morewood, "'This Silly African Business'", 80, 86, 102;

⁴⁷ Drummond to Hoare, 7 December 1935 in *DBFP*, 2, 15, 402-3. This particular concern does not seem to have gained any traction in Whitehall, but Drummond's interpretative skills don't seem to have been directly questioned until 1938-39, see Dawn Miller, 'Dark Waters: Britain and Italy's Invasion of Albania, 7 April 1939', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, xvi (2003), 300.

⁴⁸ Hinsley et al, *British Intelligence*, i, pp. 51-3, 197-200; an RAI bombing exercise in June had proven their inability to hit maritime targets, while they also lacked specialised anti-ship bombs, see John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 283, 290-1.

⁴⁹ Backhouse to Chatfield, 9 September 1935, pp. 1, 6, NMM CHT 4/1.

⁵⁰ Marder, 'Royal Navy', 1333.

⁵¹ Ibid, 1338. He lists the RMI as having one carrier, but in reality this was just a seaplane tender.

⁵² Cabinet Conclusions 43(35), 24 September 1935, pp. 2, 12-3, TNA CAB 23/82.

⁵³ Clerk to Hoare, 15 October 1935, in *DBFP*, ii, xv, 95-7.

⁵⁴ On withdrawing capital ships, see Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, i, 204-7 and Hoare to Drummond, 28 October 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xv, 184-5. For Chatfield's comments, see COS 155th Meeting, 19 November 1935, p. 3, TNA CAB 53/5.

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- ⁵⁵ Cabinet Conclusions 54(35), 11 December 1935, p. 2, TNA CAB 23/82.
- ⁵⁶ Cabinet Conclusions 11(36), 26 February 1936, pp. 8-9, TNA CAB 23/83.
- ⁵⁷ Drummond to Eden, 25 January 1936 in *DBFP*, ii, xv, 604-5; 'Note by the First Lord of the Admiralty on the Disposition and Employment of the Fleet' in *DBFP*, ii, xv, 629-31; Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, i, 216-7; Backhouse to Chatfield, 3 February 1936, Chatfield to Backhouse, 27 March 1936, NMM CHT 4/1.
- ⁵⁸ See for instance Phipps to Simon, 20 May 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 272. On Italian appreciation, see Drummond to Vansittart, 11 September 1935; Drummond to Vansittart, 12 September 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 592-3.
- ⁵⁹ On the genesis of the Singapore Strategy, see Bell, 'The 'Singapore Strategy' and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z', *English Historical Review*, cxvi (2001), 604-634; on its expected reduction on Mediterranean Fleet numbers, see Morewood, *British Defence of Egypt*, 181-4.
- ⁶⁰ Vansittart to Hoare, 7 August 1935 in *DBFP*, ii, xiv, 465.
- ⁶¹ COS 392, 9 August 1935, pp. 4-5, TNA CAB 53/25.
- ⁶² Chatfield to Dreyer, 16 September 1935, p. 2, NMM CHT 4/4.
- ⁶³ COS 150th Meeting, 13 September 1935, p. 4, TNA CAB 53/5; DPR(DR) 9, 'Programmes of the Defence Services', 12 Feb 1936, pp. 2-3, CAB 24/259.
- ⁶⁴ COS 477, 'Problems facing His Majesty's Government in the Mediterranean as a result of the Italo-League Dispute', 18 June 1936, p. 2, TNA CAB 24/263; Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, 14.
- ⁶⁵ Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, 20; 'Extract from Foreign Office Memorandum on Anglo-Italian Relations' in *DBFP*, iii, 314; Pratt, *East of Malta*, 152, 160.
- ⁶⁶ Miller, 'Dark Waters', 306, 311; Pratt, *East of Malta*, 193.
- ⁶⁷ Chatfield to Pound, 23 November 1937, p. 4, Pound to Chatfield, 22 December 1937, p. 2, NMM CHT 4/10.
- ⁶⁸ Pound to Chatfield, 24 August 1938, p. 4, NMM CHT 4/10.
- ⁶⁹ 'The Italian Navy', Naval attaché memo, 24 December 1938, pp. 1, 3, 6, TNA FO 371/23796; Naval attaché, Rome to Director of Naval Intelligence, 28 April 1939, pp. 1-2, FO 371/23810.
- ⁷⁰ C.P. 234(36), 'Western Mediterranean: Situation arising from the Spanish Civil War', 31 Aug 1936, p. 3, TNA CAB 24/264; Backhouse to Chatfield, 30 January 1937, p. 1, NMM CHT 4/1.
- ⁷¹ COS 551, 'Comparison of the strength of Great Britain with that of certain other nations', 9 Feb 1937, p. 22, TNA CAB 24/268; Embassy annual report for 1937, undated, pp. 554-6, FO 371/22437; Strategic Appreciation Committee meeting, 6 April 1939, p. 6, CAB 16/209.
- ⁷² 'Air Force', Air Attache memo, 24 December 1938, pp. 2-3, TNA FO 371/23796.
- ⁷³ CP 25(39), 'Defended ports abroad: anti-aircraft defences, Gibraltar, Malta and Aden', 26 January 1939, p. 4, TNA CAB 24/282.
- ⁷⁴ 'The Naval Situation', memo. First Lord of the Admiralty, 2 September 1938, pp. 1-2, TNA CAB 21/591.
- ⁷⁵ For a useful guide to the arguments, see Bell, *Seapower and Strategy*, 120-5.

⁷⁶ 'War Plans', 3 September 1937, p. 1, 'Possible Offensive Action', 14 September 1938, pp. 1, 3-4, C[hurchill] C[ollege] A[rchives] C[entre] [Drax Papers] DRAX 2/8; 'Major Strategy', 1 February 1939, p. 3, DRAX 2/11.

⁷⁷ 'Notes on War Plans', 21 October 1938, p. 4, CCAC DRAX 2/8; 'Mediterranean and East Indies Forces', 12 March 1939, pp. 1, 3 DRAX 2/11; 'Mediterranean Strategy', 25 January 1939, pp. 2-3, DRAX 2/19.

⁷⁸ 'Memorandum on Sea Power, 1939', 25 March 1939, 1-3, TNA PREM 1/345.

⁷⁹ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford, 2013), 153-4.

⁸⁰ 'Situation in the Mediterranean - 1st October 1938', 14 November 1938, p. 1 and Part II pp. 2-3, 'Reply to Summary of Recommendations made on 14 Nov 1938', undated, TNA ADM 116/3900.

⁸¹ 'Strategy in the Mediterranean', 10 May 1939, p. 1 TNA ADM 116/3900; Pound to Cunningham, 18 August 1939 in Michael Simpson (ed), *The Cunningham Papers* (2 vols, Aldershot, 1999-2006), i, 30.

⁸² COS(40) 303, 'Military implications of Italian aggression on the Dalmatian coast or against Corfu', 20 April 1940, pp. 3-7, TNA CAB 80/10; Strategic Appreciation Committee meeting, 6 April 1939, p. 6, CAB 16/209; 'Di. Na. 0 – Conectti generali di azione in Mediterraneo nella ipotesi di conflitto Alfa Uno', 29 May 1940, pp. 3-4, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, Dirretive Generali, DG-0.

⁸³ On how concerns over Germany and Japan influenced British strategy for imperial defence prior to 1935, and their prioritisation, see Keith Neilson, 'The Defence Requirements Sub-Committee, British Strategic Foreign Policy, Neville Chamberlain and the path to Appeasement', *English Historical Review*, cxviii (2003), 662-7, 672.

⁸⁴ Salerno, 'Naval Strategy', 167.

⁸⁵ COS(40) 270, 'Certain aspects of the present situation', 26 March 1940, p. 4, TNA CAB 80/9.

⁸⁶ COS(40) 404, 'Policy in the Mediterranean: Note by the Secretary', 28 May 1940, TNA CAB 80/12; Cunningham to Pound, 7 June 1940, Cunningham to Pound, 9 June 1940 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 48-51.

⁸⁷ Mediterranean Fleet War Diary, 10-14 June 1940, TNA ADM 199/386.

⁸⁸ WP(40) 168, 'British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality', 25 May 1940, TNA CAB 66/7; COS(40) 183rd meeting, 17 June 1940, Annex I: 'Withdrawal of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet', p. 3, COS(40) 185th meeting, 18 June 1940, pp. 2-3, CAB 79/5; Simpson, 'Force H and British Strategy in the Western Mediterranean, 1939-1942', *The Mariner's Mirror*, lxxxiii (1997), 62-65.

⁸⁹ Report of an Action with an Italian Fleet off Calabria on 9 July 1940, 21 January 1941, p. 2, TNA CAB 106/338.

⁹⁰ U[fficio] S[torico della] M[arina] M[ilitare], *L[a] M[arina] I[taliana] nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale* (19 vols, Rome, 1952-67), iv, 151.

⁹¹ Report of an Action with an Italian Fleet off Calabria on 9 July 1940, 21 January 1941, p. 5, TNA CAB 106/338. The 'trap' did exist in the form of RAI bombers, but they arrived late and bombed both fleets inaccurately.

⁹² Cunningham to Pound, 13 July 1940, in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 110-11; Greene and Massignani, *Naval War in the Mediterranean*, 84.

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- ⁹³ See Fabio de Ninno, *I sommergibili del fascismo* (Milan, 2014), 63-4, 233-7.
- ⁹⁴ Bragadin, *Italian Navy*, 15.
- ⁹⁵ F.H. Hinsley, i, 208-9; Roskill, i, appendix k, 601; Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 60-61, 134; Playfair et al, *Mediterranean*, i, 163.
- ⁹⁶ 'Continuation of interrogation of officers and crew of Italian submarine 'Galileo Galilei', 24 June 1940, pp. 1-2, TNA ADM 223/488.
- ⁹⁷ Greene and Massignani, 266-70; for a broader history, see USMM, *LMI*, xiii, *I Sommergibili in Mediterraneo*.
- ⁹⁸ 'First submarine flotilla general letters', September 1942, p. 15, TNA ADM 199/1916.
- ⁹⁹ Somerville to Cunningham, 16 December 1941, in Simpson (ed) *The Somerville Papers*, (Aldershot, 1995), 342.
- ¹⁰⁰ 'Relazione statistica sull'attività operativa dell'Aeronautica dell'inizio delle ostilità al 30 settembre 1942', p. 3, I[mperial] W[ar] M[useum], I[talian] A[ir] F[orce Series], Box 24; Giuseppe Santoro, *L'Aeronautica Italiana nella Second Guerra Mondiale* (2 vols, Rome, 1957), i, 88; Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (London, 2013), 498; Austin, *Malta*, 94.
- ¹⁰¹ Austin, *Malta*, 113, 115-7, 138, 143, 146; 'Azioni offensive su Malta dall'11-6-40 al 19-4-41', IWM IAF, Box 11; Ministero dell'Aeronautica, 'Dati riassuntivi sull'offensiva aerea nel periodico Gennaio-Aprile, 1942', 20 May 1942, IAF Box 14; Cunningham to Admiralty, 25 April 1941 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 355.
- ¹⁰² Cunningham to Pound, 15 June 1940; Cunningham to Pound, 27 June 1940 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 73, 84.
- ¹⁰³ 'Report of an Action with the Italian Fleet off Calabria' 9 July 1940; Cunningham to Pound, 13 July 1940, in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 102, 104; Greene and Massignani, *Naval War*, 77-80.
- ¹⁰⁴ 'Report on Operation MB8, 6-14 November 1940', 'Summary and Appreciation of events for months of September, October and November 1940', in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 176, 201-2.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cunningham to Pound, 14 October 1941, C-in-Cs Middle East to Chiefs of Staff, 24 October 1941 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 515, 523.
- ¹⁰⁶ GC and CS Naval History, 'The Mediterranean, 1940-1943', p. 31, TNA HW11/33.
- ¹⁰⁷ See Francesco Mattesini and Alberto Santoni, *La partecipazione tedesca alla Guerra aeronavale nel mediterraneo, 1940-1945* (Rome, 1980).
- ¹⁰⁸ Commander in Chief Mediterranean to the Admiralty, 16 January 1941, p. 2, TNA ADM 199/167; Caravaggio, 'Taranto' 113; WM(40) 288th Cabinet Conclusions, 13 November 1940, pp. 58-9, WM(40) 287th Cabinet Conclusions, Minute 5, 12 November 1940, p. 5, TNA CAB 65/16; Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 41.
- ¹⁰⁹ Cunningham to Pound, 21 November 1940 and Cunningham to Hugh England, 23 November 1940, in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 191-2; Action between British and Italian forces off Cape Spartivento on 27 November 1940, 18 December 1940, p. 2, TNA CAB 106/340.
- ¹¹⁰ Letter from Flag Officer Commanding, Force 'H' to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 20 November 1940, p. 1, TNA ADM 199/446; Report of Proceedings, 11-19 November 1940, 19 November 1940, in *Somerville Papers*, 184. It remains unclear why the aircraft did not arrive.

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- ¹¹¹ Action between British and Italian forces off Cape Spartivento on 27 November 1940, 18 December 1940, TNA CAB 106/340.
- ¹¹² Somerville to his wife, 28 November 1940 in *Somerville Papers*, 200-201.
- ¹¹³ Greene and Massignani, *Naval War*, 133.
- ¹¹⁴ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 203.
- ¹¹⁵ 'Cunningham's despatch on the Battle of Cape Matapan', 11 November 1941 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 311.
- ¹¹⁶ 'Evacuation of the army from Greece', 7 July 1941, in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 384; 'Dispositions in March 1942', by DoP, 3 April 1941, pp. 1-2, TNA ADM 1/1134.
- ¹¹⁷ COS(41) 10th 'O' Meeting, 4 April 1941, pp. 1, 3, 5 and 27th 'O' Meeting, 25 August 1941, p. 3 TNA CAB 79/55.
- ¹¹⁸ COS(41) 27th 'O' Meeting, 25 August 1941, p. 3 TNA CAB 79/55.
- ¹¹⁹ 'Operation Whipcord', 21 October 1941, p. 2; Memorandum for FSL by DoP, 23 October 1941, pp. 2, 4; Churchill to Minister of State for C. in C. Committee, M.E., 25 October 1941, TNA ADM 205/11; DO(41) 69th Meeting, 27 October 1941, p. 2, CAB 69/2.
- ¹²⁰ COS(41) 40th 'O' Meeting, 2 December 1941, p. 1, TNA CAB 79/55; 'Operation Truncheon', 2 December 1941, pp. 2-3, ADM 205/11.
- ¹²¹ Cunningham to Pound, 4 December 1941 in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 544; Admiralty to D.A.D Washington, 8 December 1941, TNA PREM 3/274/2.
- ¹²² Cunningham to the Admiralty, 10 January 1942, in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 564; on confidence see the entry for 17 December 1941 in Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario, 1937-1943* (Milan, 2010), 568.
- ¹²³ Mediterranean Command War Diary, entry for 23 January 1942 TNA ADM 199/650; COS(41) 45th 'O' meeting, 9 December 1941, p. 2, CAB 79/55; Air Ministry to HQ RAF ME, 25 December 1941, AIR 2/7654.
- ¹²⁴ For a summary of the decision making process, see Austin, *Malta*, 137-40. Cunningham to Pound, 15 March in *Cunningham Papers*, i, 584; Pound to Churchill, 8 March 1942, TNA ADM 205/13.
- ¹²⁵ Mediterranean Station: War Diary, 22 and 25 March 1942, TNA ADM 199/650.
- ¹²⁶ Despatch on the Battle of Sirte of 22 March 1942, 2 June 1941, p. 1 and enclosed report on Operation MG 1 by Admiral Vian, 31 March 1942, p. 2, TNA CAB 106/621.
- ¹²⁷ Admiralty press release, 25 March 1942, CCAC ESDN 1/3.
- ¹²⁸ Report on Operation 'Harpoon', 24 June 1942, p. 3, TNA CAB 106/346.
- ¹²⁹ Report of Proceedings of Passage of Force X and Convoy to Malta on 14 and 15 June, 1942, 21 June 1942, p. 4, TNA CAB 106/346.
- ¹³⁰ Naval Staff History No. 32: Malta Convoys, 1942 (1945), p. 27, TNA ADM 234/353.
- ¹³¹ Barnett, *Engage*, 517; Greene and Massignani, *Naval War*, 243-4;
- ¹³² WM(42), 101st Cabinet Conclusions, 1 August 1942, p. 3, TNA CAB 65/31/9.
- ¹³³ Admiralty to C in C Mediterranean, 19 September 1942, TNA CAB 121/632.
- ¹³⁴ G.W.G. Simpson, *Periscope View* (London, 1972), 266-8.
- ¹³⁵ Cunningham to Pound, 20 November 1942, Pound to Cunningham, 6 December 1942, Cunningham to Pound, 8 December 1942 in *Cunningham Papers*, ii, 57, 62.

¹³⁶ JPS(43) Operation 'Husky' Report by the Joint Planning Staff, Annex I, 10 January 1943, TNA CAB 79/59. For an in-depth examination of the planning of 'Husky', see Henriques, *Planning* (London, 1954).

¹³⁷ Roskill, *War at Sea*, iii, part i, 120.

¹³⁸ Willis to the Admiralty, 'The Naval Situation in the Mediterranean', 10 February 1943, p. 3, CCAC [Willis Papers] WLLS 6/1.

¹³⁹ Force H Tactical Instructions, 16 May 1943, pp. 1-3, CCAC WLLS 6/1.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Greene and Massignani, *Naval War*, 285.

¹⁴¹ Entry for 29 May 1940 in *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, ed. D. Dilks (London, 1972), 292.

¹⁴² Chatfield to Fisher, 25 August 1935, p. 1, NMM CHT 11/2.

¹⁴³ It should be noted that under Churchill's premiership, the Foreign Office took a much reduced role in the formation of grand strategy compared to the pre-war years, and so is less prevalent in the section of this article examining the Second World War. See Douglas Delany, 'Churchill and the Mediterranean Strategy: December 1941 to January 1943', *Defence Studies*, ii (2002), 4.